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AUTHOR Laster, Barbara P.
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ABSTRACT

For one educator, her career as a researcher probably began when she was 7 and arranged her own "library" on the back wall of the family laundry room. During the summer between her junior and senior years of college, she worked at a state institution for the mentally retarded and found herself questioning why the "clients" were locked up there. Her life became a round of observation and data collecting--the study became a senior thesis, but without much guidance in research methods from her advisor. Early-in-their-career scholars can really use some guidance in a variety of analytic methods, even if their primary discipline embraces one particular research tradition. When the educator was a middle school reading teacher, she studied the development of one struggling student, and she was asked to present her findings for an audience--this put her in a teacher-researcher strand rather than in the more general strands related to research on instruction or literacy. Where is the line between teacher-research and the more "reputable" educational research? One difference is that a teacher in higher education must go through a review of research design before a faculty committee approves a project. A classroom teacher can make spontaneous judgments about assessment and instruction and record what happens. A traditional paradigm sees research as carefully planned, not evolving, and striving for objectivity. The new paradigm of "interpretive research" is still being defined in the field of education. (NKA)

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Educational researcher or teacher-researcher: Reflections on journeying down the sometimes-divided road

by Barbara P. Laster
College of Education
Towson State University

presented at

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B. Laster

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At age seven, I cajoled the neighborhood children into "checking out" the meticulously indexed children's books which I had arranged on the two brown shelves lining the peeling back wall of the laundry room. I was the self-designated librarian and this was my "library." Each book was garnished with an index card inscribed with its title. I watched for answers to my questions:
What kinds of books were the neighborhood kids more likely to choose? Dr. Seuss? Beverly Clearly? Did the age of the kids connect to which books they chose? Were they more likely to choose those with brightly-colored covers? Or slick pictures on the cover?

If the definition of researcher is "one who asks questions and systematically pursues the answers," then I suppose my career began at age seven. Even the fascination with books and reading makes that memory a foreshadowing of future research endeavors because my professional work has been about questions of cognitive processes, literacy, and contexts of learning. But, that is getting ahead of the story.

The **driving force of research is questioning**. Thus, my stance at seven years old was a good start. I had the questions. We would look at the circumstance and say that the methodology and data analysis were at hand, too. But, frankly, at seven years old I wasn't savvy enough to recognize it.

Asking questions and then systematically collecting data that addresses those questions may have been taught by some of my high school science teachers, but I really never learned it until the questions were truly my own. That happened during the

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summer between my junior and senior years of college. I was a recreation technician behind the walls of the state institution for the retarded . Playing ball, putting on plays, rock-and-rolling with the high-level clients filled my head with questions about why these people were locked up. And I spent my night hours wondering about the other clients who were on the "low-level" cottages. My vacant life soon became a passion of collecting data about twenty-five randomly-selected residents. I asked questions about their education and physical therapy, the visits of their families and how long they had lived there. I observed these twenty-five people, tried to talk with them if they had the ability to talk, talked to many of their care givers, and took notes about their physical appearance and their speech. It was a study--60 hard pages of typing on a manual typewriter--that grew out of my observations about the inequities among the residents. I'll never forget Felicia, a girl of twelve who had lived so many years in her crib that her legs had grown into a bent position. That study was called a senior thesis and I graduated with High Honors, but the data could have been analyzed much more thoroughly and with a variety of viewpoints; my advisor for the project didn't give me much guidance. At the time, I was an anthropology major and knew nothing of statistics. My anthropological methods courses did help me look at the data and the questions in an interactive way, what I might now label "constant comparison." My questions grew or changed as I collected more data. In many ways, too, I was a participant observer searching for patterns among the data. I found some: For example, clients who were visited by their families received more therapeutic services than those who were wards of the state and clients who looked the most "normal" lived on the highest level cottages. I remember these findings even now, twenty-five years later. That work was never shared with a wider audience. It sits in some file drawer in our musty under-the-stairs storage.

I think that there are several lessons from this experience. For one, early-in-their-career scholars, can really use some **guidance in a variety of analytic methods**, even if their primary discipline usually embraces one particular research tradition. I could have benefitted from knowing how to do some descriptive statistics in the case of

the data that I had collected. If one spends the time to ask probing questions, design a careful study and collect the data, having the means to analyze it is very helpful. This is important, of course, to the researcher, but isn't it as important to the prospective audience who might benefit from this new knowledge?

As I reflect on my study of the institution for the retarded and my life as a researcher in general, I notice that **presentation and audience make a difference**, also. Several years ago, when I was a middle school reading teacher, I studied the development of one struggling student. Jay's was a case of great concern and some results. After I got to know this small, silent or soft-spoken seventh grader, I found out why his name had been flagged for me from the elementary school. He had scored poorly on the standardized tests because at twelve and a half years of age, Jay could decode text quite well; his oral reading was fluent, but he could not tell me or anyone else (or himself) anything about what he had "read". Whether oral or silent, Jay did not engage with the meaning of the text that he read. For two years I worked with Jay, either one-on-one, in small groups, or as part of a whole class; our content was parallel to his English class, or sometimes we worked on social studies or science assignments. I kept all the data about his literacy learning (notes that I wrote, interviews of other teachers and of Jay, audiotapes of our sessions together, lists of books that he read and how well he comprehended them, his writing and assignments from other classes). At the end of two years, I analyzed this data to see if I could describe my teaching and Jay's progress. I wrote a paper called "Teaching Metacognition in Reading: A Case Study." A national conference asked me to present it. It was placed in a "Teacher-Research" strand. I was happy to present and later publish the work.

Presentation and audience make a difference sometimes in illogical ways. In the case of my work with Jay, why was I put in a teacher-researcher strand rather than in the more general strands related to research on instruction or literacy? Was I a teacher-researcher? Certainly. Was I an educational researcher? Why not? Now that I am a university professor rather than a public school teacher, would that same paper be placed in the teacher-research slot or a different slot at a national conference? I

ask this because, at the time, I wondered how that decision was made. Related issues have informed the recent writings of other educational researchers/teacher-researchers who are presently college professors. In Educational Researcher, a journal published by the American Educational Research Association, Wong (1996?) posits that one does an injustice to both roles when simultaneously doing research while teaching because the methods of research conflict with the methods of instruction. Wilson (1996) counters that the roles of teacher and of researcher, when using qualitative methods, can be wonderfully complimentary. Baumann (1996) reflects on his experience as a second grade teacher for one year. He concludes that the tensions that arise in teacher research are not so dependent on the methodology, but are a function of time and task demands. "No matter how organic research becomes, it must be conducted within an already hectic schedule of teaching and supervisory responsibilities. Conflict over time was a pervasive theme..." (p.33) I wonder if a classroom teacher is ever considered an educational researcher? Baumann's conclusions fit well with my life as a researcher both when I am employed by the public schools and when I am employed by the university. I am still not clear as to why classroom teachers who choose to be researchers are not just considered educational researchers? Is the line between teacher-research and the more reputable educational research one of methodology? It seems not because, according to Baumann and others (Noffke, 1997), there are many methodologies that can be used in classroom research.

Whatever the label, the research that I do is an attempt to uncover information. It is, in a small, unassuming way a search for Truth; although I find Patton's (19) characterization to be more acceptable:

"In speculating on causes, consequences, and relationships in this chapter the emphasis has again been on the humble notion that, in the end, all we can provide is perspective." (p.327) Yet, even if all that we provide is perspective on a situation, I am still shadowed by concerns of rigor and validity in my research. During the early 1980's, I did a study of second graders in Northern Virginia using a computer for the

first time; I programmed the Atari computer to follow up on their social studies lesson. In that case, the issues of rigor were addressed by a committee of people because it was my dissertation study. My advisor did help me focus on the use of multiple measures, and I used both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. Since then, I've been absorbed with using triangulation. In most situations, I have been able to find at least three ways of collecting data. This makes my perspective more secure, but I'll never stop asking the haunting questions: Does this measure what I intend to measure? Have I collected and analyzed enough information? How sure can we be that what I report is not an anomaly?

There seems to be one difference between being a P-12 classroom-based researcher and one that teaches primarily at an institution of higher education. In order for me to do any research involving my own students or any humans (such as the children and parents who come to reading clinic), I must go through a review of my research design by a committee called the Institutional Review Board for Human Participants. As a classroom teacher, I made spontaneous judgements about assessment and instruction and then recorded what I did and what happened. Dynamic decision-making, in fact, is characteristic of reflective teaching. Later, I may analyze the data some more, write it up, and see if there is an audience for my presentation. But the IRB Committee has disallowed this kind of research because the Committee requires pre-determined design, informed consent of the participants, collection of data by someone other than the teacher, and complete anonymity and confidentiality. I have found this to be a curious skewing of the natural settings for educational research. For example, how can a teacher change the course of his/her teaching --if it is also considered research--when the IRB Committee needs to review these changes six weeks in advance? There are many questions such as these, but they seem to be indicative of a larger issue. Perhaps, I stand at a crossroads where two research paradigms are colliding. A traditional paradigm sees research as carefully planned, not evolving, and striving for objectivity. The IRB Committee, for example, desires the removal of the main researcher from direct contact with the subject, and with making

sure that the subjects are anonymous. I come from a lifetime of teaching where action research is part of being a good teacher. Telling my students that I am not going to look at their reflection logs until after the semester is over and I have turned in their grades, as the IRB requires, skews the research because I have no ongoing feedback about my research question during the process of teaching/researching. (Another example relates to being a classroom teacher: if I asked permission of the parents of my students to use the information in their cumulative records, the parents would wonder why I was asking; after all, it is part of my job to look at their records.) Yvonna Lincoln (1996) calls the new paradigm "interpretive research" and observes that it is still being defined in the field of education, even though it has a long history in anthropology and sociology. We are still trying to decide what knowledge is within this paradigm and are only beginning to address the criteria/standards for judging whether the research is good or poor. Yet, we know that where there is "serious, sustained inquiry," we should not dismiss it without better understanding of how it could add to our knowledge (however we define knowledge). The new paradigm also sets up a new relation with the respondents, one that is empowering to those who traditionally have been disenfranchised. There is a view to include the voices of all stakeholders. Knowledge is first and foremost, in fact, the property of the community of "subjects"; often they are listed as authors, rather than just anonymous subjects (Lincoln, 1996).

According to Lincoln, we must have **passion about our research**. A deep sense of caring, trust, and mutuality rather than a stance of "objectivity".
And this seems to be the key to my reflections on becoming an educational researcher. I look at the small shelf of research that I have done. The most forgotten was a study that I did as a masters' degree student in 1976: "Was there a change in attitudes toward reading among eighth grade students who were part of a Teacher Corps Project?" This research question was suggested by one professor and the analysis was directed by the research professor to the extent that I never really owned it. I didn't remember that I had done a one-tailed test of significance as well as other descriptive statistics, yet I remember much about my students in the small Appalachian

town. We wrote journals back and forth every day, so I knew many specifics about their lives and their literacy growth. I knew what books were hard for them and I saw daily their development as writers. Yet for those eighth graders, the quantitative data about their attitudes toward reading showed no statistically significant growth. The research project was missing the main events. And I was not invested in the research. Luckily for the kids, I was passionate about what was happening in their lives.

Finally, I wonder how one's life as an educational researcher gets constrained by lack of investment in one's research. For example, when one is a junior researcher on a large project or one is a principal investigator fulfilling a research grant that doesn't fit one's primary interest: How can one have a passion for the work? How will this research further the researcher's development? In conclusion, I reflect on reflection on the starts and stops of one's work, and of how the hurdles and easy paths form a landscape of one's development as a researcher. It seems that these hard times and easy times occur in all components of the research process: research questions, data analysis, and our presentations. For me the flowing times were among the institutionalized and the youngster named Jay, and the hurdles were finding my place at the research conferences or within the traditional research paradigm. Most importantly, reflection on the **passion** that goes with research gives me a clue as to what is highly significant.

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